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## Can students' perspectives inform reading and listening pedagogy?

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### Introduction

Recent studies have evidenced the efficacy of reading while listening against reading only (see Chang & Millet, 2015). There is a strong case for providing simultaneous aural input to a written text, but the question remains as to what kind of input is most effective. It has yet to be explored whether there is an advantage to live spoken reading input over a recorded reading. Finnegan (2015) explained the importance of the features of live performance that are missing from the printed word. Gee (2014, p. 107) highlights the role of a teacher in directing attention at the right time and place. Audio-assisted listening adds a further dimension to the printed word, but still lacks the presence of a live performance. It is hypothesized that students may benefit more from a live reading of text by the teacher in a classroom than from the audio-assisted reading which has been set for homework. In the current preliminary study, students were asked to compare their perceived usefulness of audio-assisted reading with the live reading of a text in the classroom.

### Literature Review

Many EFL pedagogical materials focus on grammar at the expense of the phonological aspects of meaning-making, arguably because the former is made apparent in the written word. Halliday and Greaves (2008) warn, "We should not be misled by the fact that, in writing systems that are phonologically organized, like that of English, the prosodic aspects of the system are not represented", whereas in fact "intonation and rhythm are integrated into the total semogenic potential of the English language" (p. 74). Finnegan (2015), eloquently explains the influence of acoustic memory on reactivating the sonic aspects inside the head of the reader: "Print, too, may carry sonic echoes of a sung acoustic performance" (p. 136). Competent readers project intonation onto the printed word based on past associations of specific vocabulary with particular intonation contours, which in turn expresses fine nuances of meaning. English learners who have not had adequate exposure to vocabulary and its corresponding intonation may find certain nuances of meaning beyond their grasp.

Harris (2000) claims that alphabetic representation creates artificial subdivisions in the stream of speech, which could only be faithfully represented by a sound spectrum. He likens alphabetic transcription of speech to a rendition of a jet of water featuring separately drawn droplets of water (p. 137). Harris' argument is convincing, but without this apt analogy most speakers fail to question the

complex relationship between the sounds of speech and the written symbols on the page. Harris protests the comparison across modalities, questioning the practice of making “a visual record of the invisible” (p. 187), with another compelling analogy: “What would a photograph of a smell look like?” (p. 187). Nevertheless, competent readers adeptly make connections between the written and spoken modalities. It has long been suggested that native speakers of English internally process the spoken word on an aural level as they read. Bain and Ribot (1879, as cited in Firth, 1964) “expressed the opinion that in reading or recalling a sentence we feel the twitter of the organs. ‘Each visual perception is accompanied by suppressed articulation’” (p. 177).

### **Prosody and Intonation for English Language Learners**

Jenkins (2000) explains that the complexity of intonation renders it difficult to teach in the classroom and may be more readily acquired outside of it (p. 152). Underhill (1994) similarly describes the difficulty of teaching intonation suggesting it may “not be susceptible to cognitive or deliberate choice” (p. 93) and “less accessible to conscious intervention” (p. 194). Nevertheless, Tench (1981) provides a compelling case for the inclusion of intonation in the curriculum:

Intonation is an important part of pronunciation; it is systematic and structured; it accompanies every utterance and is an integral part of the communication of English. (p. 94)

Intonation does not operate as an isolated feature of English, but rather, as Halliday and Greaves (2008) explain, has an overlapping function with the grammar:

A stretch of language that we recognize on phonetic/phonological grounds as a tone unit will be (the realization of) an information unit in the grammar; and this, in turn, will have the same extent as a grammatical clause (p. 59).

Intonation also functions on a discoursal level (Underhill, 1994). Halliday and Greaves explain how rhythm and stress map onto “the total flow of the discourse, rather than directly realizing systems at the lexicogrammatical stratum” (2008, p. 167). Both spoken and written language consist of structured units of information, which are expressed through intonation and rhythm.

### **Interdependence of Grammar and Phonology**

Grammar and phonology are not independent of each other, which is an important reason why EFL learners should not learn these skills in isolation. Hernandez (2013) explains that there is a relationship between the stress patterns of two syllable English words and their word class. Two syllable nouns tend to be stressed on the first syllable, whereas two syllable verbs tend to be stressed on the second: “The differences in stress patterns illustrate how grammatical categories can be signalled in the underlying sound structures of language.” (p. 30). Demuth et al. (2012, as cited in Hernandez, 2013) describe the phonological bootstrapping hypothesis, explaining how “aspects of grammar could be found in the underlying phonological and prosodic structure of a language” (Hernandez, 2013, p. 42). Japanese teachers of English in Japanese high schools have coined a special expression to help students make the distinction in the stress pattern of homographs which function as both nouns and verbs such as ‘present’, ‘export’ and ‘record’: *meizendogo* (noun ‘before’, verb ‘after’) (Y. Shono, personal communication, June 16, 2016).

### **Advantages of Audio-assisted Reading**

Tokuhamma-Espinosa (2003) describes how different hemispheres of the brain are responsible for

different aspects of language processing: “Whereas the rules of syntax and grammar are left hemisphere functions, prosody, or the “texture” of language, is right hemisphere” (p. 69). The acoustic dimension of language must be included in the curriculum in order for prosody to be given the necessary exposure that learners require. If students are solely presented with the written word on the page, by implication they are not accessing the full resources available to them.

Cheetham (2005) notes the regular co-occurrence of the bi-modal input of auditory and visual input for first language learners in literate societies, evidenced in the reading of stories aloud to children: “It is often surprising how many reading intervention studies treat silent, solitary reading as the normal or control situation” (p. 30). Recent studies have compared audio-assisted reading to silent reading, and demonstrated superior results for the former. Chang and Millet (2015) have demonstrated that audio-assisted reading can produce faster reading rates than silent reading, and that these gains can be sustained without continued practice three months later in a delayed post-test. They also compared comprehension gains between a group which undertook audio-assisted reading and one which undertook silent reading, and again found that the former group improved “substantially more” (p. 100). Chang and Millet present an argument in favour of audio-assisted reading that the learners are “pulled faster through texts and enjoy the benefits of reading quickly” (p. 100).

Describing L1 English, Aitchison (2012) explains “a general rhythmic pattern appears to be tattooed onto speakers’ minds” (p. 163). She provides a metrical tree to explain the stress pattern of words, such as the four-syllable word ‘transformation’ for which the stress pattern is 2-4-1-3. Using the example of malapropisms, she explains the appearance of words with a similar metrical tree, and similar beginnings and endings:

What are you *incinerating* (insinuating)?  
Try *permeating* (permutating) (p. 163)

Aitchison (2012) explains how the rhythm of strong and weak syllables features in the mental lexicon and how “the rhythmic pattern and the segments are therefore intertwined, much in the way that flesh and bones are inextricably intermeshed in a body” (p. 163). Arguably, Japanese learners of English would benefit from familiarity with these essential elements of English rhythm, which are not specified orthographically. Accordingly, one reason for the superiority of audio-assisted reading for Japanese learners may be the presence of specific pitch changes on the primary stressed syllable of individual words. The pitch is higher on the stressed syllable and lower on the surrounding unstressed syllable(s) (Underhill, 1994). Underhill recommends learning pronunciation and word stress simultaneously. Vocabulary learning is a Herculean task given the sheer number and importance of lexical choices. The provision of audio-assisted reading provides an opportunity for learners to both visually and aurally encounter a mass of vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

Another reason for the superiority of audio-assisted reading may be the role of discourse intonation in the way that it helps structure units of information in the flow of discourse. Complex changes in pitch contours may not be taught by direct instruction, but rather from extensive exposure to texts in context. Audio-assisted reading may be effective because it permits readers to exploit the facilitative role of intonation in comprehending longer stretches of discourse.

## Orthographic and Phonological Vocabulary Recognition

Milton et al. (2010) distinguish between vocabulary which is recognized in written form and that which is recognized aurally by L2 learners. The students in their study possessed a larger orthographic recognition vocabulary than phonological. They suggest that the phonological recognition vocabulary may be mentally stored in ways which differ from native usage. They speculate that vocabulary testing for speaking purposes should measure phonological rather than orthographic recognition. Their study evidenced a significant correlation of phonological vocabulary size with test scores in writing, speaking

and listening, but not reading: “learners appear to need knowledge of words in phonological form to speak well, rather than visual word recognition which explained so much in reading and writing” (p. 93).

## Method

Twenty-one second year English majors and twenty-one second year Engineering students took compulsory English classes over one semester which focused on the development of reading and listening skills. The English majors were required to read and listen to audio-books for their weekly homework, and the Engineering students were required to read and listen to graded readers using a commercially available online system for English learners. The English majors were instructed to read and listen for the first nine weeks, and listen only for the following five weeks. The Engineering students were instructed to read while listening for fourteen weeks. The English majors listened to the teacher conduct the class in English. The Engineering class listened to the teacher reading a story to them three times each lesson, and were required to respond to various exercises to assess their understanding of the text. At the end of the semester both the English majors and the Engineering students responded to questionnaires designed to elicit the usefulness of reading while listening, and their preference for audio-books or live English.

The teacher who read the stories to the students is an Australian who has spent over twenty years in Japan. It is likely that most students would have been unfamiliar with the teacher’s accent before the beginning of the semester. Because she has been teaching in Japan for such a long time, she has developed a ‘classroom voice’ in order to facilitate the students’ comprehension.

Two questions formed the focus of this preliminary study:

1. Do students prefer reading while listening or listening only?
2. Do students prefer listening to a live reading of the text or listening to audio-books?

## Results and Discussion

### English Majors

As an initial question, it was decided to investigate the students’ listening comprehension. If students preferred to rely on confirming their listening comprehension with the written text, it can be inferred that the development of their listening skills continue to merit attention. Twenty-one second year English majors were asked to reflect on their weekly assignments in the semester, in which they had been requested to read while listening for the first nine weeks and listen only in the second five weeks. They responded to the following closed questions:

- Which has been easier to understand, reading while listening, or listening only?
- Can you read more quickly when reading while listening or listening only?
- Which did you find more enjoyable, reading while listening or listening only?
- Was it easier to concentrate on the meaning of the text when reading while listening or when listening only?
- Is it easier to understand the audio-books or the teacher’s spoken English?

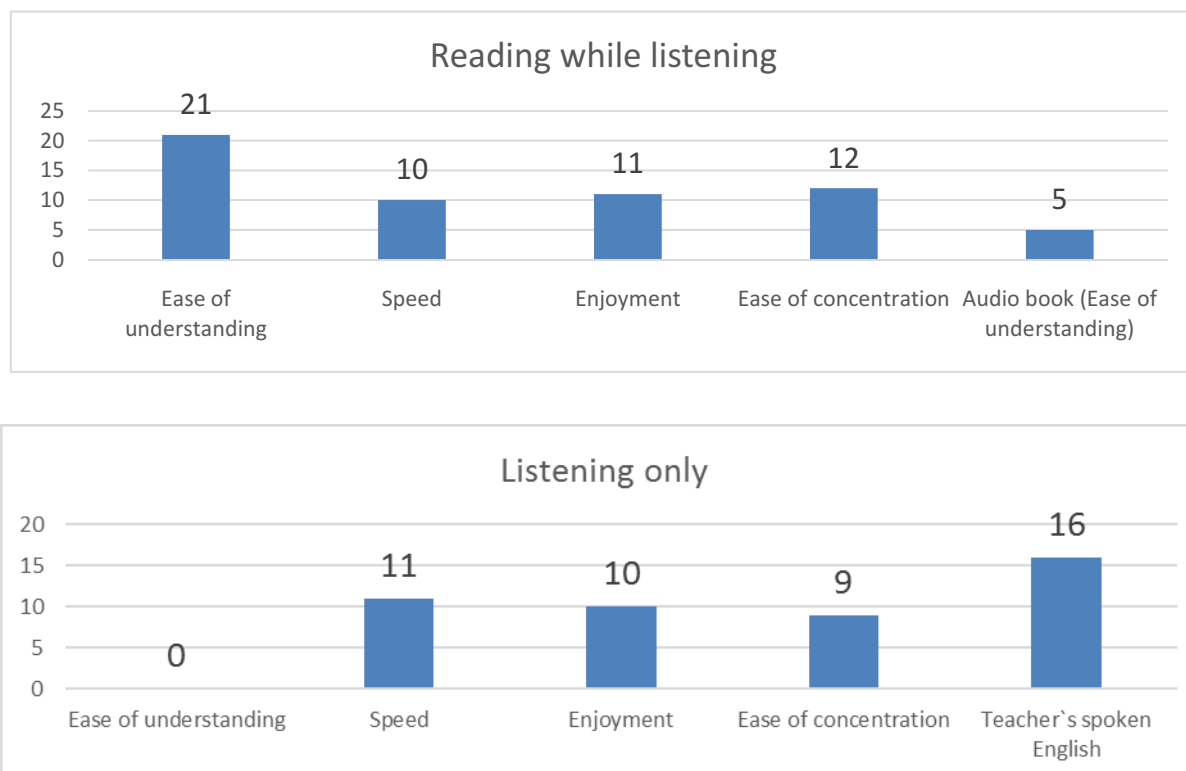


Figure 1. English majors compare reading while listening with listening only.

### Reading while Listening versus Listening Only

All students found reading while listening easier than listening only. The overwhelming preference for reading while listening suggests that teachers need to direct attention to helping students develop listening skills, and that their preferences for the kind of English they listen to deserves investigation.

An anticipated benefit of reading while listening was that it would provide an intermediary step towards listening only. It seems that for these students, at this stage, listening only may be associated with unease and a lack of confidence. The overwhelming preference for reading while listening over listening only highlights an area which merits further research. It suggests that prior learning has directed focus on the written word and neglected the spoken word. In this particular study, the semester long program of weekly homework of listening to audio-books was clearly insufficient to aid their emancipation from dependence on written English.

There was little indication of any differences in speed or enjoyment of reading while listening and listening only. Regarding concentration, there was a slight preference for reading while listening. The final question revealed that most students found the teacher's spoken English easier to understand than the audio-books. Strikingly similar findings arose when a similar question was put to the class of Engineering students.

### Engineering Majors

Twenty-one engineering students responded to a questionnaire designed to elicit their judgement on the relative effectiveness of listening to the teacher reading a story to them each week with listening to audio-books for homework. The class was held for fourteen weeks over the semester, and consisted of second

year students who were taking a compulsory Communicative English class.

In response to the question of whether they preferred the live reading of the story in the classroom each week or listening to the audio-books for homework, students responded as follows:

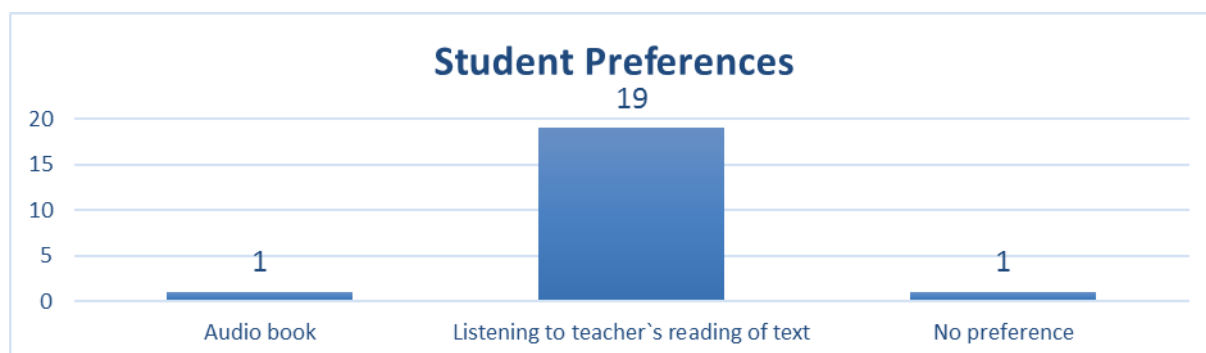


Figure 2. Engineering students' preferences for listening to readings of live English or the audio-book.

The Engineering class indicated an even stronger preference for listening to live English than the English majors. The difference may be partly due to the differing nature of the class activities. In the Engineering class, the students listened to a text read aloud by the teacher three times every lesson. The questionnaire required them to compare the live reading of the text with listening to the audio-books for homework. The question asked of the English majors differed in that the teacher did not read texts to the class each week, and students were simply asked to compare live teacher talk with listening to audio-books. Nevertheless, both classes indicated a strong preference for listening to live English over audio-books.

In response to a perceived need to provide auditory models of English, there are a wealth of cassette tapes and CDs, and more recently, online listening activities available to English language learners. This availability of graded readers with CDs and online listening has been very attractive for teachers responsible for large classes. Nevertheless, the results of this preliminary survey suggest that the use of live English by the teacher still remains an important pedagogical activity.

Wajnryb (2001) explains that "language is a form of social action" (p. 101). She presents the non-binary functions of language as *representation* and *communication*. The former provides information and the latter fosters relationships. If this distinction were applied to the practices of listening to English spoken by a person with whom one interacts regularly, such as a teacher, and listening to audio-books, it could be argued that the former is both representational and communicative, and the latter is purely representational. Arguably the presence of the teacher in a live reading is preferred by a majority of the students because it includes the communicative function. The live reading of a text to students is a bilateral process.

Reading of stories aloud to children and students is a widespread practice in literate societies (Cheetham, 2005). Mem Fox (2013) urges parents of young children to read at least a thousand stories to their children before they learn to read. Primary school teachers read class novels to children from age five to twelve in order to provide models of the ways in which punctuation is represented as sound (S. Simpson, personal communication, September 14, 2016). Wajnryb (2001) explains: "Communication, in its ordinary unremarkable form, is mostly a process of joint construction involving co-operation and intertwining of understandings, a process so normal, natural, spontaneous and dynamic that people don't even notice it" (p. 206). The live reading of the text to the students every week in the present study featured these elements of Wajnryb's description. As the teacher read the text she monitored the students' responses, and varied the pace and clarity of her delivery accordingly. Wajnryb (2001) explains how even communication in which only one party is speaking is jointly constructed, because "interpretation implies the active collusion and complicity of the interlocutor whose involvement actually, if invisibly, shapes the

unfolding nature of the text” (p. 176).

A further illustration of the distinctiveness of spoken language is provided by Ong (1982): “Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body.” (p. 67). Ong observes the unity which oral communication fosters in a group (p. 69). He describes the sense of community which is engendered in a group engaged in a common task; there is a sense of togetherness, which disappears when students are asked to engage in private reading tasks: “Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself” (p. 69).

## Conclusion

This study is based on a small sample of forty-two students in a single university. The live reading of the text to the two classes was conducted by a single teacher. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that all students necessarily prefer a live reading by a teacher to listening to audio-books. Further studies need to be conducted using several different teachers’ reading aloud to their students, and different student groups need to be selected from additional faculties to those in the present study.

The English majors in this preliminary study demonstrated an overwhelming preference for reading while listening over listening only. This suggests much more work is needed to help students develop their listening discrimination skills in order to be able to understand spoken text.

Both previous studies regarding first language acquisition (see Cheetham, 2005; Fox, 2013) and the responses of the L2 learners in this study highlight the advantages of reading aloud to students. Before students tackle the complex process of decoding written English, they need a foundation in listening comprehension. The practice of modelling reading aloud deserves greater prominence for L2 English language learners, and will continue to be the focus of the next stage of this research.

Despite the tremendous improvements in technology permitting a wealth of listening materials for English language learners, there is still a need for the traditional practice of a teacher reading stories to students. Such insights from students into their own learning may aid teachers into refining the ways in which they design listening activities for their students.

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